

AFAP Delegates Review Issues, Help Set Standards of Living for Soldiers, Families

By Margaret McKenzie

As delegates to the 23rd Army Family Action Plan conference, which met in Alexandria, Va., Jan. 23 through 27, 110 representatives reviewed 75 issues from Army installations throughout the world.

Workgroup issues were distributed among seven categories: child & youth, entitlements, employment and volunteers, family support, force support (of which there were two groups), medical and dental services, and this year an outside-of-the-continental-United States specific workgroup.

The top five issues for 2005 Soldiers and their families as voted by the delegates were:

- Wounded Soldier updates
- Casualty assistance for families of Army National Guard and Reserve Soldiers in an inactive status
- Advanced life support services on Continental U.S. Army installations
- Military spouse preference across all federal agencies
- Health processing of demobilizing Army Reserve component Soldiers

The top six critical active issues previously introduced into the AFAP process include:

- Distribution of Montgomery GI Bill benefits to dependent(s): This issue would allow all Soldiers with at least 10 years of service to distribute their Montgomery GI Bill benefits to their dependents.
- In-state tuition: This issue would allow military families who reside in a state on military orders in-state tuition rates. Family members should also be allowed to retain "in-state" status once established even when military orders take them to a different state.
- Family member eyeglass coverage: This issue would allow funding for a portion of the cost of eyeglasses under TRICARE, purchased through outside vendors at reduced prices, or provided at cost via the Frame-of-Choice Program from a military laboratory.

- Modification of weight allowance table: This issue would amend enlisted portion of the PCS weight allowance table to more closely match the weight allowance of officers.

- Reserve component post mobilization counseling: This issue would allow Reserve component Soldiers and family members up to one year after mobilization to identify the need for counseling related to service-connected problems.

- Dental and vision insurance coverage for

Additionally, the delegates voted on the top five mobilization/deployment and family support strengths. Included on the list were Army Community Service programs/Family Services, Military OneSource (counseling, information and referral), improved Soldier communications with families during deployments, Soldier/Family pre-deployment training and Family Readiness Groups.

The top Five Mobilization/Deployment and Family Challenges voted by the delegates



Master Sgt. William K. Jones, noncommissioned officer in charge of Family Readiness at Headquarters, 7th Army Command, in Schwetzingen, Germany, facilitates the Family Support work group at the 23rd AFAP conference, Jan. 23 through 27. During the conference, delegates reviewed 75 issues from Army installations throughout the world to help set standards of living for Soldiers and families.

federal employees: This issue would add dental and vision coverage options to the Federal employee's health benefits programs.

Four services were identified by the delegates as this year's most valuable: Army Community Service, Medical and Dental, Morale, Welfare and Recreation Services, Commissary.

were stress from lengthy and frequent mobilizations and deployments; training/equipment/personnel shortfalls; loss of jobs and property when mobilized for Reserve component duty; lack of training, timely intervention and follow-up for Soldiers returning from deployment (e.g. post traumatic stress disorder, safety and medical); and marketing of

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Photo by SGT. Angel D. Waller, U.S. Army

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available support programs.

A meeting of the General Officer Steering Committee, chaired by the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, was held in conjunction with the AFAP conference. Senior Department of Defense and Army leaders reviewed 25 issues in the AFAP process. Seven were completed:

- Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students Act awareness for Reserve component: U.S. Army Reserve and Army National Guard Soldiers are briefed on the provisions of the HEROES Act during their initial in-processing and at other annual briefings. This Act identifies the rights that Reserve component Soldiers have when they deploy.

- Funding for eArmyU: Funding was expanded to include all eligible Soldiers to participate in the laptop option eArmyU post-secondary education program. All Soldiers must meet the three-year eArmyU service remaining requirement. Officers who enroll in the program must agree to a two-year active duty service obligation.

- Army retirement benefits awareness: The Army retirement services Web site address, www.armyg1.army.mil/retire, is now published bi-annually on leave and earning statements for both active duty and Reserve component Soldiers. Many Web sites provide active and Reserve component retirement information and also provide automated tools to compute benefits. My Army Benefits, another tool that will outline retirement ben-

efits, is scheduled to be online in June.

- Extension of educational benefits for surviving spouses: Since July the surviving spouse of a service member killed on active duty has up to 20 years after the date of the member's death to use the education benefits. Surviving spouses of military retirees or veterans who die of service connected causes have 10 years after the member's death.

- Incapacitation pay procedures: Previous regulation had no specific time frame when incapacitation pay would commence. AR135-381 Incapacitation of Reserve component Soldier and DA PAM 135-381 Incapacitation of Reserve Component Soldiers Processing specify a 30-day requirement for pay and allowances to begin.

- TRICARE pre/postnatal benefits information: Previously there was no source that clearly explained specific pre/postnatal benefits covered by TRICARE and the options for care. Improvements include a fact sheet/pamphlet entitled "TRICARE Maternity Care Options" that gives easily understandable details of maternity care with an updated policy and reimbursement manual.

- Family care plan provider access to military installations: Family care providers were finding it difficult to enter post. The Office of the Provost Marshal General has released a message that states that commanders have the authority to issue temporary car decals and identification cards to caregivers. With this,

caregivers should be able to access installations.

Of the issues that were presented, 12 were listed as active and will be worked to resolution and two were deemed unattainable. The GOSC approved the entry of one new issue into the AFAP – Relocation of Pets from OCONUS.

AFAP was created in 1983 with the initial AFAP planning conference, and developed fully in 1984, the Year of the Army Family, as a program to help the Army address the needs and concerns of family members. The program highlighted the importance of Army families to overall Army success.

The U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center oversees the AFAP process to ensure issues are referred to appropriate agencies for resolution. Semi-annual GOSC meetings monitor the progress of each issue until it is resolved or deemed unattainable.

"We all know that we recruit an Army but we retain the Army family," said Gen. Richard A. Cody, Vice Chief of Staff, Army. "That is what AFAP is all about, to make sure that ... we also have the best infrastructure, and the best institutions back home for the family."

For the past 23 years there have been 602 issues in the AFAP process that have driven 98 legislative changes, 141 Department of Defense Army policy and regulatory changes and 162 improved programs and services.

The GOSC will meet again on May 16. ■

Teens Helping Teens, Army Teen Panel Celebrates 10 Years

By Margaret McKenzie

The Army Teen Panel celebrated 10 years of accomplishments by briefing Army leaders and participants at the Army Family Action Plan conference Jan. 23-27.

Since the Panel's inception in 1995, ATP members established the Panel's infrastructure, helped develop the Department of Defense Youth Strategic Action Plan, published the ATP handbook, designed the Teen Chain of Communication, produced the Army School Transition public service announcement, and created the "Real Teens Connected" Web site.

"Real Teens Connected" was developed to give Army teens a vehicle to communicate

with and support each other as they navigate the rigors of Army life. "Real Teens Connected" will reside on the Boys & Girls Clubs of America YouthNet site www.bgcayouthnet.org. It can be accessed using Army Knowledge Online beginning in March.

Nine ATP members attended the AFAP Conference. Six of them served as delegates to the Child and Youth Group, reviewing 11 issues submitted from installations Army-wide, while the other three teens worked on the "Real Teens Connected" marketing plan.

"The youth were very well informed about the issues that came before the group," said P.K. Tomlinson, Army Child and Youth

Services deputy director. "They had certainly done their homework in terms of research and were able to field many questions that the subject matter expert might have had to answer otherwise."

"This is a great experience for the teens," said Teen Panel member Justin Sprague of Korea. "It is good to know that the other members of the AFAP working group listened to us and allowed us to take the lead in many of the discussions at the conference."

The ATP includes youth from families of the Active Component, including Accessions Command, the National Guard and the Army Reserve. ■